Radical Cultures and Local Identities: The North-east Labour Movement's Response to the Spanish Civil War

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Introduction

To the chagrin of many grassroots activists, the national labour movement (the Labour Party and the trade unions organised in the TUC) endorsed the Conservative-dominated National Government's policy of Non-Intervention in the Spanish civil war until autumn 1937. Non-Intervention denied the Republic its right in international law to buy arms for its own defence, placing it at a distinct disadvantage and on the same moral plane as the rebels, who received support from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy.[1] While the national labour movement established various relief funds, which north-east based left-winger C.P. Trevelyan condemned as a policy of offering "sympathy, accompanied by bandages and cigarettes", elements of the grassroots movement had more room to take political action and the desire to do so.[2] This was the case even after the Labour Party eventually voted to oppose Non-Intervention in autumn 1937, as it remained fairly passive on the issue and

[1] For an overview, see Paul Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: Fontana, 1996).

[2] Labour Party Annual Report, 1936, 172–173. For the British Labour movement response, see Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

did not hold a national conference in the crucial year of 1938 at all. A close examination of this grassroots response allows for the fruitful exploration of many issues around local activism, what constituted radicalism in this period and the relations between radicalism and locality.

Before the case studies, some definitions are necessary. Firstly, who were the labour movement radicals? This chapter considers activists within the "official" labour movement (i.e. non-Communist), industrial or political militants who tended to the left within the Labour Party and TUC-affiliated trade unions. While Communists were proscribed, many *were* active within the official movement in different contexts as were members of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which had disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 1932 and moved to the left. While this definition was satisfactory before 1935, the waters were muddied considerably with the adoption of the popular front by the Communist International. This meant that the CP now supported the establishing of alliances of all anti-fascists including liberals and even, in some versions, "progressive" Conservatives and was a stark reversal of the party's only recently ended, ultra-sectarian "class against class" policy. This change in policy appeared to demand a toning down of "left-wing" rhetoric in order to avoid anything that might alienate a potential liberal ally. Indeed, the popular front placed the CP at a theoretical level to the right of the Labour Party, whose leaders could now say that they, unlike the communists, were not prepared to sacrifice socialism to ally with liberals.

"Radicalism", however, was not necessarily simply what radicals did. In the specific context of responses to the Spanish civil war, "radicalism" could be any stance or activity by a local labour movement institution or activist that was not strictly within the remits of the official movement's national position. In other words, before autumn 1937, any agitation for the Republic and against Franco, challenging Non-Intervention and so forth could be regarded as radical. After then, "radical" could apply to anyone who agitated for

the national movement to take more firm action on the issue. It could also describe any joint activity with members of left-wing parties proscribed by the national labour movement such as communists (though fascists were also nationally proscribed). Most radical, however, must be the willingness to advocate the use of unconstitutional means to force the government's hand on Non-Intervention; industrial direct action, thereby challenging constitutionalism, one of the labour movement's sacred cows. Commentators have tended to regard the north-east labour movement as loyal to the national leadership and moderate in its political and industrial endeavours.[3] It might be expected, then, that only the traditionally radical localities would really mount a sustained and vigorous challenge to the national labour movement's torpor on Spain.

"Locality", too, is problematic in this context in that the labour movement at grassroots was a complex set of interconnected institutions that allowed any activist to operate in several arenas within the same geographical locality (such as, for example, in a local Labour Party branch and trade union branch). Furthermore, activists could also operate within quite different "localities", working through labour movement institutions in larger geographical contexts such as the constituency, area, or even within institutions that were regional in their scope (such as the North-east Federation of Trades Councils, NEFTC). In exploring radical cultures and responses to the Spanish civil war, it is evident that the nature of labour movement organisation at grassroots level meant that "locality" was at best a somewhat crude way of predicting where a radical response to a given political issue might be manifest. Rather, certain institutions (that were not invariably locality-specific), and, more so, the activists who worked through them, are perhaps the best way to predict radicalism. For this reason, this chapter takes a partly prosopographical approach, considering the impact of a generation of activists whose radical politics were

[3] Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994), xvi, 348.

initially forged in the political and ideological flux of the Edwardian period and subsequently in the Soviet inspired post-war world. Many of these activists, who shared a mining heritage, travelled away from the region for a political education to then return home and help to form radical local cultures around them and within the institutions through which they worked. In this confused period, it is evident that "radical" activity on Spain was not the preserve solely of the "radicals" and that, indeed, there was a partial inversion between the radicals and the majority of supposed moderate north-east labour movement activists over the issue. The responses to Spain demonstrate that radicalism was a complex phenomenon in flux and subject to the vicissitudes of many kinds manifest through various organisational forms, at different levels and diverse geographical areas.

The Development of the Radical Culture of Chopwell

The clearest example of a radical local political culture in the north-east came with the activists operating through Blaydon local and constituency Labour Parties. These included Steve and Andy Lawther, two brothers of Will Lawther, who was by 1936 a DMA fulltime official and vice-president of the MFGB. The Lawthers and many of their fellow activists had had varying degrees of contact with the local radical political culture centring on the pit village of Chopwell in the north-west of the Durham coalfield (and, by the late 1930s, located in Blaydon constituency).

Chopwell was radical before the Lawther family moved there in 1906.[4] At that time it was in Chester-le-Street constituency, a stronghold of nascent Labour in the north-east. Will Lawther and others "plunged with zest" into the 1906 general election campaign and the Labour candidate J.W. Taylor won Chester-le-Street for the first time. As secretary of the Chopwell ILP branch, Will Lawther helped organise meetings every "Baff Saturday" (the

[4] Dave Douglass, "The Durham Pitman", in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Miners, Quarrymen and Salt Workers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 273.

Saturday miners were not paid).[5] At one meeting, he converted two staunch Methodists, Vipond Hardy and Henry Bolton, to socialism: "They listened carefully, they questioned us closely, and at the end both were convinced".[6] Both men became instrumental in forming and sustaining the local radical milieu into the inter-war period (though Hardy was not prominent by the late 1930s).

Will Lawther, who was born in 1889, was central to a process of further radicalisation in Chopwell, returning from a year spent studying at Central Labour College in autumn 1912 a syndicalist (and soon becoming an anarchist syndicalist). At college, Lawther had met several important syndicalists including Noah Ablett, one of the authors of the influential syndicalist text, *The Miners Next Step*.[7] For Lawther, syndicalist politics were "the logical development of the fighter for social progress, particularly the young men".[8] However, what really marked Chopwell out, and allowed these ideas to gain currency, was the presence of George Davison, a left-wing millionaire who had made his fortune in the photographic company Kodak. Davison soon sponsored a "Communist Club" in the village, one of only three such clubs in the country.[9]

This infrastructure –in place at a time before the Russian revolution ensured a far firmer dividing line between communist and anarchist– facilitated the development of more

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[5] Lewis Mates, "From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther", (Newcastle University, MA thesis, 1996), 6.

[6] *Newcastle Journal*, 15 March 1955. Bolton, a primitive Methodist, was born in 1873 and 16 years Lawther's senior. Anthony Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (University of Hull: Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, 1970), 16.

[7] Mates, "Lawther", 8. See *The Miners Next Step* (1912), reprinted with introduction by Dave Douglass (Doncaster: Germinal and Phoenix Press, 1991).

[8] *Newcastle Journal*, 17 March 1955.

[9] *Newcastle Journal*, 16 March 1955; John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (London: Paladin, 1978), 254.

revolutionary strains of thought than could be easily contained within the ILP's ill-defined ethical socialism and parliamentarianism. Chopwell now experienced the development of a probably fairly small but undoubtedly significant anarchist syndicalist grouping. Lawther's "Workers Freedom Group" sold anarchist literature, held public meetings and organised discussion circles.[10] Chopwell became an organising centre for syndicalists, hosting, in October 1912, an "Industrial unionist conference" with representatives from several pits in attendance.[11] A Chopwell Socialist Sunday School soon followed the "Communist club", and thus by the outbreak of the Great War radicals in Chopwell had a funded meeting place to educate activists and make adult recruits as well as a means of sustaining and further enhancing their radical culture in the next generation.[12]

However, the Bolshevik victory in Russia seemed to bring to an end most of the interest in anarchism in post-war Chopwell, which soon received the epithet of "Little Moscow".[13] This was largely a result of the militancy of the villages' miners, especially during the 1926 general strike and the lockout that followed. This reputation was something of a media creation: Chopwell never elected a Communist representative to Blaydon UDC, nor was its local CP branch ever particularly large outside of the exceptional circumstances of 1926.[14]

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[10] *Freedom*, May 1913; Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, 277; Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900–1914* (London: Pluto, 1976), 169.

[11] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 October 1912.

[12] See Ray Challinor, "Jimmy Stewart and his Revolting Children", *Bulletin of the North-east Group for the Study of Labour History*, 17 (1983), 6–10.

[13] Most famously in the *Morning Post* (Tuesday 15 June 1926), which claimed that Chopwell was the "reddest village in England", where "precocious Lenins dwell". Mates, "Lawther", 12–13.

[14] Lewis Mates, "Durham and South Wales Miners and the Spanish Civil War", *Twentieth Century British History* 17: 3 (2006), 383–384.

The party certainly did not dominate in local politics as it did in "Little Moscow" villages in South Wales, where it actually supplanted the Labour Party.[15]

One significant effect of 1926 was that the local radical political culture of Chopwell spread further afield. This followed the blacklisting of known militants by the mine owners in the aftermath of their victory in the lockout. "Everybody who could be victimised, was", claimed Will Lawther later.[16] None of the Lawther brothers could find work in a Durham pit; Andy and Jack emigrated to work in Canada, youngest brother Clifford emigrated to Australia, Eddie Lawther moved to mine in Kent (where he became a union leader) and Steve was already working as a rent collector.[17] The diaspora appears to have in part transported the radical culture of Chopwell elsewhere, as Steve and wife Emmie relocated to Blaydon town itself.[18] Thus, by the late 1930s, while Blaydon had a Socialist Sunday School, it seems that Chopwell's had ceased to exist.

Many of the leading activists in Blaydon Labour Party, who both helped form the radical local culture and who it, in turn, influenced, remained on the left in the later 1930s. (Will Lawther, by this time a DMA official, was influential through it and the national Miner's Federation). Emmie and Steve Lawther were both prominently involved in the Communist-inspired Minority Movement within the trade unions in the early 1930s; Steve was a Labour county councillor (until 1937) and Emmie was on the constituency Labour Party executive later in the decade. Bolton, who had spent a short period in the CP in 1928 before returning to the Labour Party, had been a member of Blaydon UDC since 1919 (and

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[15] Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), 207. See also Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows. Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain* (London: Croon Helm, 1980).

[16] Margaret Morris, *The General Strike* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 103.

[17] Steve Lawther had been chair of Chopwell lodge 1919–1920. Mates, "Lawther", 23–33, 63–70; A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (Hull, 1970), 40.

[18] See DRO, D/Sho 115/6, *Emmie Lawther—A Tribute* (1965).

its chair six times). He was secretary of Blaydon CLP from most of this period as well. Jim Stephenson (born in 1891), who had first joined the ILP aged 16, was a member of Blaydon UDC, an auditor of the CLP and secretary of Blaydon LLP, while Andy Lawther was an unsuccessful Labour candidate for the 1937 Durham County Council elections. The three were also important in their miners' lodges. By the late 1930s, Andy Lawther had secured work in the pit, but it was in the pay of the lodge rather than the owners. He was checkweighman at Swalwell pit and lodge chair until being elected checkweighman in Spen pit in December 1937 and lodge compensation secretary the following July. Bolton and Stephenson, too, retained work in the pits and influence in the lodges by this means. Bolton was checkweighman at Chopwell colliery as well as the lodge delegate and Stephenson was checkweighman of Blaydon Burn pit and also lodge secretary.[19]

Of these leading activists, the politics of the Lawthers and Bolton appear to have altered in accordance with changes in CP policy.[20] Indeed, they may even have held membership cards for both Labour and Communist Parties in contravention of Labour Party rules; considering their actions they might as well have been card-carrying CP members. However, Stephenson, also active on Spain, appeared to retain political attitudes, including non-involvement with the popular front, from his recent ILP heritage.[21] Notwithstanding

[19] *The Worker*, 4 July 1930; 17 October 1930; *Blaydon Courier*, 2 January 1937; 10 February 1939; 24 February 1939; 14 April 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 5 December 1937; *North Mail*, 22 June 1938; 5 July 1938; *Consett Chronicle*, 2 April 1942; Mason, *General Strike*, 40. See also John Adamson, "A Comment by James Stephenson of Winlaton", *Bulletin of the North-east Group for the Study of Labour History*, 4 (1970), 25–32.

[20] Andy and Steve Lawther supported the CP's opposition to the "imperialist" Second World War in October 1939. Bolton supported the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1942, both positions that only the most dedicated pro-Communist could easily take. *North Mail*, 16 October 1939; *Consett Chronicle*, 2 April 1942.

[21] Lewis Mates, "The United Front and the Popular Front in the North-east of England, 1936–1939" (PhD thesis, Newcastle University, 2002), 53, 185, 211.

political differences, these individuals were most obviously publicly active in determining the Blaydon Labour Party's response to the conflict in Spain. They also played a disproportionately influential role in efforts of the Labour left in the wider region. It is noteworthy too that most of their pro-Republic activity came from working within the Labour Party rather than through their miner's lodges, none of which (with the partial exception of Chopwell) appeared particularly active on Spain either within the DMA or in the wider political context. It seems likely that, with such control in Blaydon Labour Party, these activists deemed it the most effective tool for their purposes (though they almost certainly ensured that their lodges voted in favour of pro-Republic initiatives in the DMA). But this was a fairly unusual choice for radical miners, many of whom used their lodge and the wider miners' union as the main conduit for their politics.

Blaydon Labour Party Activists and Spain

Blaydon activists were instrumental in framing one of the earliest public responses to the Spanish conflict from the region's left. This came in the context of a Newcastle meeting to elect five delegates to represent the region's labour movement at the International Peace Conference in Brussels in early August 1936. Three of these delegates were activists from Blaydon; Stephenson and Bolton of the Labour Party and Charlie Woods of Blaydon CP. The meeting, claiming to be representative of ordinary workers on Tyneside, passed a resolution moved by Bolton. Its wording was "radical" as it noted explicitly the "interference of Fascist Italy and Germany in Spain", something that the autumn 1936 Labour conference only accepted as a possibility requiring proof.[22] It also unequivocally called for the government to "refuse licences for exports to Fascists in Spain" but to "supply arms to the Spanish government necessary for the fight against fascism"; this at a

[22] *Evening Chronicle*, 4 August 1936.

time when the CP had only just sorted out its position on the issue.[23] Later in August, Bolton ensured, as chair of Blaydon UDC, that it pronounced in favour of the Spanish Republic. Blaydon Labour activists also acted through a DMA organised set of mass meetings that linked the issue of Spain with domestic concerns, chiefly the Means Test.[24]

Blaydon Labour activists' response to the affirmation of the labour movement's support for Non-Intervention in autumn 1936 initially came in the form of a local Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC), active from January 1937. Like other similarly named grassroots committees, this took its nominal inspiration from the national SMAC formed by socialist and communist doctors in August 1936 in order to send medical units to the Republic. Here the radicalism was manifest in part in terms of those involved. While all Blaydon committee's officials (chair, secretary and treasurer) were local Labour councillors, local Communist activist Wilf Jobling, who had attended Chopwell Socialist Sunday School as a child, played a key role in establishing the committee.[25] This was reciprocity from previous activity on Spain. In early September 1936, Steve Lawther spoke from the platform of a Blaydon CP "Spain Solidarity meeting" that Jobling chaired. After the meeting, a member of the audience expressed surprise at Lawther appearing to be a mouthpiece for Harry Pollitt, the national CP leader.[26] Unapologetic, Lawther responded that he thought Pollitt "one of the ablest working class leaders in Britain today".[27] Joint activity on Spain between the left parties in Blaydon was just one of several issues on which they were active before

[23] The *Daily Worker* initially supported Non-Intervention; see Buchanan, *British Labour Movement*, 47.

[24] *North Mail*, 19 August 1936; *Blaydon Courier*, 22 August 1936.

[25] Marx Memorial Library, Box B-4/M/2, Wilf Jobling Memorial Leaflet produced by Blaydon SMAC; *Blaydon Courier*, 16 January 1937; 17 April 1937; 8 April 1938.

[26] *Blaydon Courier*, 12 September 1936.

[27] *Blaydon Courier*, 19 September 1936.

and after the conflict broke out. Another notable example was the activity surrounding the NUWM hunger march to London in November 1936.[28]

While it was actually only the fourth such committee in the north-east, Blaydon SMAC worked with a clear anti-fascist message, supporting the "British Medical units" that were "doing such good work in the struggle of Spanish democracy against Fascist intervention".[29] This marked it out from many other such committees that chose instead to eschew partisanship as much as possible, claiming that the aid they collected was merely for the innocent civilian victims of the conflict.[30] The committee, of which Steve Lawther was secretary, embarked on an energetic diary of events; delivering a leaflet to households on Thursday 21 January 1937; collecting food from those households on the Friday; a stall on the Saturday with a follow-up meeting at the Miners' Welfare Hall on Sunday 31 January. It secured some early successes. There was a good attendance at the public meeting that screened the film *Defence of Madrid*, and which raised £13 10s (a sizeable sum for such a meeting). It also registered a "large number of names" of volunteers to sell flags for the cause on 6 February.[31] Still, the committee did not discuss the conflict in terms of a revolution, unlike, for example, Boldon Labour Party men's section, who in September 1936 organised a local public meeting under the title "An Eye Witness Account of the Spanish Revolution".[32]

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[28] *Blaydon Courier*, 22 August 1936; 10 October 1936; 17 October 1936; 21 November 1936; 9 January 1937.

[29] *Blaydon Courier*, 16 January 1937.

[30] For example, Seaham SMAC's appeal discussed the "great suffering" that was the "one aspect which overrides all Party considerations", and which made it a "matter of common humanity to try to relieve this anguish as far as possible". It also claimed that "treatment is given impartially to all who need it" (*Durham Chronicle*, 26 March 1937).

[31] *Blaydon Courier*, 6 February 1937.

[32] Warwick Modern Records Centre (WMRC), 292/946/41, Robert McDarmont letter to Walter Citrine, 15 September 1936. On the Spanish revolution see "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" in

The fraternity with Communists, and especially Jobling, became more evident when he was killed fighting in the International Brigade at Jarama in February 1937. Blaydon Labour councillor John Wilson, for example, exhorted activists to "salute our fallen comrades", and avenge them "by the increased activity that we carry out in every sphere of the Working Class Movement".[33] Similarly, Henry Bolton paid tribute to Jobling's sacrifice during a session of Blaydon council.[34] The institutions through which Blaydon Labour activists worked changed in early 1938, as they began to hold public meetings on Spain under the auspices of the Labour Party itself rather than the SMAC. However, they continued to share their platforms regularly with Communists and other non-party members.[35]

As noted above, Bolton and Stephenson were central activists in the region's peace movement. This provided a context outside of the strict confines of the labour movement where Blaydon activists could direct or influence political activity in an area far larger than their own immediate locality, thereby, in some sense transporting their local radical culture to a wider plane of action. Bolton's chairmanship of the Tyneside Joint Peace Council (TJPC) furnished him with another arena in which to act with Communists, such as North Shields activist Nell Badsey (who was a TJPC secretary by June 1937). Some liberals also played key roles in the TJPC. Though there were also pacifists involved, the TJPC was able to articulate a clear anti-Non-Intervention message and it held meetings on Spain and other foreign policy issues throughout the late 1930s, mostly in Newcastle and South Shields. While Communist involvement helped ensure that the TJPC did not receive the

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Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 62–105.

[33] *Blaydon Courier*, 20 March 20 1937.

[34] *Blaydon Courier*, 20 March 20 1937.

[35] *Blaydon Courier*, 4 February 1938; 8 April 1938; 15 April 1938; 6 May 1938; 10 June 1938; 17 June 1938; 4 November 1938; 17 February 1939; 24 February 1939; *North Mail*, 13 June 1938.

official labour movement backing that its enthusiasts wanted, it was still influential enough to launch the Tyneside foodship campaign in December 1938 which, by raising around £4,500 in 3½ months, was the single largest of the humanitarian Spanish aid campaigns in the region.

Local Challenges to the Blaydon Radicals and their Culture

However, even in Blaydon the "radicals" did not exercise total control. Indeed, Spain provided an opportunity for opponents of the radicals' project to mount an offensive. This was evident in the behaviour of Edward Colgan, chair of Blaydon trades council and a Catholic. Colgan used his position as Blaydon trades council delegate to try to frustrate NEFTC support for the Spanish Republic. A resolution opposing Non-Intervention in Spain and urging the TUC to support the Republic proposed at the NEFTC's September 1936 delegate meeting gave Colgan his chance. However, the amendment Colgan seconded, that called on the NEFTC to endorse Labour's national support for Non-Intervention and asked the Spanish government to protest against the burning of churches, was defeated by a large majority vote against.[36] Nevertheless, Colgan's position was clearly an irritant to the radicals. While Blaydon trades council was only sixth largest of the fifteen affiliated to the NEFTC, it still had a membership of 3,290. A weakness for Colgan, however, was that it did not involve miners, who were averse throughout the Durham coalfield to affiliating their lodges to local trades councils.[37] While it seems unlikely that Colgan was able to inhibit Blaydon Labour Party's vigorous efforts for Republican Spain (and its cooperation with Communists), the trades council he controlled did not seem to offer any support to the Republic.

[36] *Newcastle Journal*, 9 September 1936.

[37] WMRC, 292/79B/49, NEFTC 1936 affiliates return. See Blaydon trades council correspondence on this issue at WMRC, 292/79B/47.

As significant in this context was a challenge from within the Blaydon labour movement mounted against the town's Socialist Sunday School, one of the main instruments the radicals sought to use to sustain and advance their culture. In October 1936, Blaydon Burn Joint Collieries Welfare Committee refused Blaydon Socialist Sunday School the use of the local miners' hall for the annual celebrations of the Tyneside Union of Socialist Sunday Schools. This was literally a clash of cultures in several ways. On one obvious level, here was a conflict between a local radical culture and a moderate "labourist" culture. Alfred Wharton, secretary of Bessie Pit lodge and the welfare committee defended its actions as the Socialist Sunday School apparently taught "merely the propaganda of the Communist Party ... anyone who has had any dealings with these people knows how cleverly they can hide their real object behind their apparent innocence".[38] Jim Stephenson of the school claimed that the welfare committee were "flat earthers" and "Labour, not Socialist".[39] One sub-text here was a clash between those relatively new to an area and the locals, irritated by the new imported (radical) ideas –the Socialist Sunday School was only established in Blaydon in January 1936– and implied criticism of their own (in)activity.[40]

Other forms of culture clash were evident; it also appeared to be a conflict between religion and irreligion. The antagonists accused the Socialist Sunday School of poaching pupils from established Sunday schools, and of teaching blasphemies such as encouraging pupils to spit at pictures of Jesus. The radicals pointed to the movement's respectable heritage as a pioneering act of Keir Hardie and countered the wilder allegations with threats of court action.[41] Yet there was also friction between Methodist cultural practices and Catholicism. Stephenson, from a Methodist background, attacked the welfare

[38] *Blaydon Courier*, 31 October 1936.

[39] *North Mail*, 12 October 12 1936.

[40] *Blaydon Courier*, 17 October 17 1936.

[41] *Blaydon Courier*, 10 October 1936; 7 November 1936; 14 November 1936; *Sunday Sun*, 11 October 1936; 18 October 1936.

committee for allowing beer to be drunk in the hall.[42] The clear implication of the debate was that Wharton was a Catholic, particularly significant at this time in Blaydon as radical Steve Lawther was in the throes of a controversy over allegations about a Blaydon catholic school saying prayers for a Franco victory.[43] Spain was very relevant to the timing of the dispute as it came when news of church burnings in the Republican zone were at their peak, causing some Catholics a degree of anxiety about the labour movement's position on the issue.[44]

This war of words that lasted for several weeks and was fought out in the letters pages of three local newspapers revealed much about the position of the radicals and their culture within the Blaydon locality. On the positive side, the Socialist Sunday School had received extensive and unexpected publicity and the strength of the opposition to the radicals was limited. Wharton and the welfare committee were significant in terms of controlling access to one miner's hall. While the secretaries of miners' lodges *were* influential people, Wharton's lodge, Bessie pit, was small and therefore had only limited influence within the DMA.[45] Indeed, Stephenson, as secretary of the larger Blaydon Burn lodge, was in a strong position to go head-to-head with Wharton.[46] Secondly, Wharton's own relationship (and possibly that of others like him) to the radical culture was equivocal. Steve Lawther pointed out the contradiction in the supposed anti-Communism by noting that Wharton

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[42] *Blaydon Courier*, 10 October 1936; Mason, *General Strike*, 40.

[43] *Blaydon Courier*, 24 October 1936; 31 October 1936; *North Mail*, 22 October 1936; *Catholic Herald (Tyneside)*, 30 October 1936.

[44] Though the north-east's considerable working-class, labour movement Catholic population did not, on the whole, offer much opposition to activities on Spain, some important Catholic Labour activists were vocal in their support for the Republic. See Lewis Mates, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Left: Political Activism and the Popular Front* (2007), 91–114.

[45] K. Brown, "The Lodges of the Durham Miners' Association, 1869–1926", *Northern History*, 23 (1987) 139.

[46] *Blaydon Courier*, 10 October 1936.

himself had chaired a meeting of the 1936 Blaydon Hunger March Council of which well-known local Communist Wilf Jobling was secretary.[47] Thus, while Wharton rejected one aspect of the radical culture, he had endorsed actively, albeit perhaps unknowingly, another keystone of it; that of fraternal relations and political cooperation with communists and their causes. Nevertheless, that there had been a very public challenge mounted to the radicals and elements of their culture in Blaydon at all was significant. Indeed, Jason Simmons of the national council of British Socialist Sunday Schools "could hardly believe opposition coming from a mining area".[48] Furthermore, if Wharton's estimates that in nine months the school had only gained between fourteen and eighteen pupils were accurate, this suggested that the radical culture these activists had tried to transplant from Chopwell was not taking well in its new environment.[49] Indeed, some of Stephenson's language, like his reference to being "untouchable" in Blaydon, suggested that he felt somewhat in an ostracised minority.[50]

There were lessons here for the forming of local radical cultures relating to time and space. Clearly, it was far more difficult to create and sustain a radical local culture in a larger and industrially more diverse town like Blaydon (with its consequently more complex local labour movement institutions) than the single industry pit village of Chopwell. The pioneers of Chopwell's radical educational institutions were not troubled by the problem of being regarded as incomers as, in the early years of the twentieth century, the village was expanding rapidly with many, like the Lawthers, moving in from elsewhere. There were actually few established local activists in Chopwell to upset at a time when the Labour Party was in its infancy and the socio-political landscape in

[47] *Blaydon Courier*, 7 November 1936.

[48] *Blaydon Courier*, 10 October 1936.

[49] *Blaydon Courier*, 17 October 1936. A week earlier Wharton had claimed it had 14–16 pupils (*North Mail*, 12 October 1936).

[50] *Blaydon Courier*, 10 October 1936. Letters from Emmie Lawther and "A Regular Reader" supported Stephenson.

considerable flux. By the 1930s, in contrast, the "radical" had become too often closely associated with the Communist. Debate consequently polarised and the divisions between radicals and the rest within the movement became clearer and less easily bridged (and in spite of belated attempts to achieve precisely that with the united and then popular front campaigns that achieved little in the north-east).[51] The issue of Spain highlighted this like few others. In terms of working-class education too, the later 1930s were not like former propitious times.[52] While the hegemonic culture amongst the main activists of Blaydon Labour Party in the later 1930s was clearly "radical", it was not so in other significant elements of the Blaydon labour movement (mostly on the industrial wing). The relationship between the local and the radical in localities with complex labour movements was clearly subtle and often difficult to delineate. In these cases, the ways in which activists behave in any given institution, and the radical political culture that they may create within them, allows for a better appreciation of the dynamic than what is necessarily a usually crude association of radicalism and locality.

Other Durham Pit Village Responses

In the north-east, it was only really in the pit villages, where the miners' lodge represented the vast majority of working members of single industry communities, that "locality" and "radicalism" could have a close and in some respects uncomplicated relationship within the framework of the official labour movement. In this respect the conditions that applied to Chopwell and the "Little Moscows" of South Wales, that encouraged a two-class view of society due to the physical and social separation of their inhabitants were shared with

[51] See Lewis Mates, "The North-East and the Campaigns for a Popular Front, 1938–9", *Northern History*, XLIII (2), 2006, 273–301.

[52] John McIlroy, "Two Tales About Crisis and Corruption at the Central Labour College", *Labour History Review*, 71 (1) (2007), 69–93.

many pit villages.[53] The lodges were usually financially strong and representative of the vast majority of miners in any given pit; especially so after the non-unionism campaign many conducted in the later 1930s.[54] Furthermore, they could act autonomously from the central DMA in both industrial and political matters, as the occasional dispute at an individual pit revealed. In recent times, there had been unofficial disputes at several radical lodges. In 1929, during Dawdon lockout, the CP intervened when the DMA leadership washed it hands of the dispute, though they ultimately did not help to deliver victory. Ryhope, another radical DMA lodge, was involved in a 16-week dispute in 1933, while Follonsby came into conflict with the DMA leadership over a local dispute, and particularly with Will Lawther (whose car was chased away by a crowd of Follonsby miners armed with stones), in 1935.[55] The lodges often ran and staffed the Labour Party in their localities, and could also be influential in the constituency parties.[56] They could also forward resolutions for approval of the whole DMA, with the aim of securing this union's considerable financial and political clout behind their projects.

Many radical DMA lodges including Boldon, Marsden, Horden, Ryhope and Dawdon were involved in some of the most committed forms of pro-Republic activity, collecting money, organising agitation and pushing for more support through the DMA.[57] Boldon miners

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[53] Mates, "Durham and South Wales**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Miners", 383–384; Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, 203–204, 207; Hywel Francis, "Welsh Miners and the Spanish Civil War", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5:3 (1970), 183.

[54] Mates, *Spanish Civil War*, 130.

[55] The lodge received extensive support from local lodges (but not from the central DMA), and won all its claims after seven weeks. *North Mail*, 19 August 1939; Douglass, "The Durham Pitman", 284–285.

[56] As a result of the way the Labour Party developed in the Durham coalfield, the central DMA dominated the party. Beynon and Austrin, *Masters and Servants*, 340–341.

[57] Lewis Mates, "'A "Most Fruitful Period?' The North-east District Communist Party and the Popular Front Period, 1935–9", *North-east History*, 36 (2004), 74–81.

made an early £5 donation to Spanish aid in August 1936.[58] In mid-October 1936, Boldon and Marsden lodges (along with others in the locality) organised a demonstration of 4,000 in South Shields on Spain (and domestic issues).[59] In 1937, Boldon lodge arranged a house-to-house collection of £6–8–8 for the "Spanish government" in May and protested to the government about the issue in November. In 1938 it called on the government to resign over its foreign policy in February and in June decided to contribute 5 shillings weekly to support Tynemouth Basque refugee hostel.[60] Marsden lodge's decision to "give their whole-hearted support" became particularly evident in March 1937.[61] Then the lodge submitted an ultimately unsuccessful resolution that the DMA should support industrial direct action against Non-Intervention.[62] Horden lodge, in contrast, urged the National Council of Labour (a national committee of the trade unions and Labour Party), to do all in its power to lift Non-Intervention in January 1937.[63] The following month it made a highly unusual attempt to impose unilaterally a one-shilling levy on its members towards the NCL's Spanish aid fund. While lodge members rejected this proposal by vote (the money would have come directly from their pay packets rather than lodge funds), the lodge still made a £50 donation.[64] Dawdon miners formed a SMAC in their locality in May 1937 and a month later Ryhope lodge, along with members of Ryhope colliery Labour women's section, organised New Herrington and District SMAC (a house-to-house collection raised

[58] *Shields Gazette*, 31 August 1936.

[59] *Newcastle Journal*, 12 October 1936.

[60] *Shields Gazette*, 21 May 1937; 2 November 1937; 28 February 1938; 4 June 1938.

[61] *Shields Gazette*, 31 August 1936.

[62] Durham Miners' Offices Redhills (DMOR), DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 13 March 1937; *Shields Gazette*, 2 March 1937.

[63] Horden lodge and the DMA executive made a successful proposal for the DMA to send financial aid to Asturian miners in March 1934. The lodges voted 844–50 in favour. DRO, D/DMA/124, DMA Council Meeting, 24 March 1934; *Daily Worker*, 26 January 1937.

[64] *Sunderland Echo*, 15 February 1937.

£10 4s. 8d.).[65] Ryhope lodge also sent a protest resolution to the government in March 1938 over foreign policy, and called for a popular front against it.[66]

Invariably, there was at least one particularly prominent radical activist involved in these lodges. In Dawdon lodge, the CP retained an influence in the later 1930s in the form of chair George Burdess, though the other officials who stood as Labour Party candidates locally also appeared radical.[67] In Marsden lodge, the key individual was the checkweighman Will Pearson, who was associated with the CP from its very early years.[68] Born in 1882, Pearson also attended Labour College. His father was president of Marsden lodge, and Pearson started work aged 12 at the same pit. In 1921 he was elected checkweighman and lodge secretary at Marsden and in 1922 he became a member of South Shields council. That year he was Will Lawther's parliamentary election agent in South Shields.[69] While Pearson was also, like Blaydon activist miners, a Labour councillor, he was (unlike his Blaydon counterparts), inactive on Spain in his local Labour Party, South Shields. Though South Shields Labour Party remained quiet on the issue in 1937, Pearson himself worked on Spain within the official movement solely on the industrial wing, through his lodge, the local miners' federation and the DMA executive, of which he was a member for some of this period. (He also sat on the national Miners' Federation executive too). Like Bolton, Pearson also spoke on the public platforms of unofficial

[65] Unlike Blaydon SMAC, Dawdon had a more humanitarian appeal. *North Mail*, 23 June 1937; *Sunderland Echo*, 3 May 1937.

[66] *Sunderland Echo*, 28 March 1938.

[67] *Sunderland Echo*, 15 March 1937; March 22 1937.

[68] Pearson's name is listed with that of Steve Lawther and Harvey as "CP supporters" at a conference of trades unionists in Newcastle. *The Communist*, 21 October 1922. (I am grateful to Don Watson for this reference).

[69] *Shields Gazette*, 22 October 1937.

institutions including the TJPC and South Shields SMAC.[70] Why Pearson acted in this way is unclear, but it might have been related to a dispute over miners' lodges' voting strength within the South Shields Labour Party. The dispute had rumbled on for a year by the time the DMA voted on a St. Hilda, Harton and Marsden lodges resolution claiming that the DMA grant to South Shields Labour Party of £100 per annum "is now being used for purposes which are contrary to the principles for which it was given" and asking for its withdrawal. This was defeated by a lodge vote 157–675, which appears to have ended the matter.[71] There was also evidence of some Catholic opposition to action on Spain within the South Shields party, but this was not particularly strong.[72] Notwithstanding the reasons, it is clear again that the choices made by radicals about the institutions they operated through to affect their political goals were important in explaining which institutions in any given locality were radical or passive on Spain.

Another intriguing case in this context is that of George Harvey (checkweighman and secretary of Follonsby lodge) and also a member of the DMA and MFGB executives for some of this period. Harvey's political history was similar to that of other individuals who contrived to form radical local cultures in the north-east labour movement. Like Will Lawther, who was four years his junior, Harvey was an early member of the ILP. He attended Ruskin College in 1908, which radicalised him, and was later an anti-militarist in Great War. By the early 1920s, like Pearson and the Lawthers, Harvey was associated with the CP and the Minority Movement, though he was a Labour Party councillor in the 1920s and the later 1930s.[73] Harvey and Pearson were the runners-up in the 1935 vote for a

[70] DMOR, DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 1936–1938; *Shields Gazette*, 14 November 1936; 16 November 1936; 22 February 1937; 26 February 1937; *North Mail*, 25 July 1938.

[71] DMOR, DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 8 May 1937. For the build-up to this, see DMOR, DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 25 May 1936 and 30 November 1936.

[72] Mates, *Spanish Civil War*, 98.

[73] See G. Walker, "George Harvey: The Conflict Between the Ideology of Industrial Unionism and the Practice of its Principles in the Durham Coalfield" (MA Thesis, Ruskin College, 1982) passim; Geoff

DMA paid official that resulted in the appointment of a third militant, Sam Watson of Boldon lodge.[74]

Harvey was certainly an advocate for the Republic. He regularly wrote to newspaper letters pages about Spain in the early months of the conflict, condemning, for example, in November 1936, the official movement's "weak and timid attitude", while praising the CP's stance and the Soviet Union's support for the Republic.[75] Given this it seems likely he would have personally argued in favour of action on Spain in the DMA executive, but there were no Follonsby lodge resolutions to the DMA on the issue (when it had been a strong advocate of support for the 1936 NUWM hunger march).[76]

Within the DMA, the radical lodges, their members on the executive like Pearson and Harvey, and the radical DMA full-time officials like Sam Watson and Will Lawther undoubtedly played key roles in getting the union to support many Spanish aid causes and agitate for greater support for the Republic within the national labour movement. However, their efforts would have been often frustrated by the union's machinery had their cause not been a popular one amongst non-radical union activists and members. Indeed, the often comparable activities of many non-radical lodges to their radical counterparts revealed that Spain galvanised many. Furthermore, the lodges consistently

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Walker, "George Harvey and Industrial Unionism", *Bulletin of the North-east Group for the Study of Labour History*, 17 (1983), 21–24; Ray Challinor, "Jack Parks, Memories of a Militant", *Bulletin of the North-east Group for the Study of Labour History*, 9 (1975), 34–42; Douglass, "The Durham Pitman", 279–290. See also Ray Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London: Croon Helm, 1977).

[74] DMOR DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 16 June 1936; Beynon and Austrin, *Masters and Servants*, 338, 348, 351, 354, 359–362.

[75] *North Mail*, 2 November 1936.

[76] DMA records are clear on this but Follonsby may well have been involved in other forms of pro-Republic campaigning that simply did not register in the sources. DMOR, DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 17 August 1936; 15 September 1936.

strongly supported proposals to make substantial donations to Spanish aid causes (though they did reject a proposal to take direct action against Non-Intervention in March 1937). In contrast, they did not support others of the radicals' political projects in this period. For example, in autumn 1936 the lodges rejected a Follonsby proposal that the DMA support the NUWM Hunger March by a margin of over five to one.[77]

How can this support be explained? The MP for the mining constituency of Seaham, Manny Shinwell, thought that there was a "very close kinship" between County Durham and Republican Spain due to "a similarity of views, and from a similarity of the traditional struggles fought by the Durham miners in the past".[78] Certainly, the DMA had displayed recent solidarity with the Asturian miners in 1934. Yet the pattern of radicals receiving support from moderates over Spain was repeated throughout the region in many different institutions, for example in the support Wansbeck CLP gave C.P. Trevelyan's nationally important critical stance, or in the NTFLP acting on a proposal from radical Arthur Blenkinsop to hold a public meeting and conference on Spain in May 1937. And a good deal of solidarity work came from the smaller units of labour movement organisation, the local Labour Parties and trade union branches, that were most easily galvanised into action in their localities. In contrast, when Trevelyan, Blenkinsop and others acted on another political concern of the radicals at that time, the popular front, their support and "influence" within the labour movement largely evaporated.[79]

Concluding remarks; Who Was Radical?

The propaganda of the left that claimed aggressive fascism was advancing in Spain and had to be stopped—"no pasarán!" as the contemporary slogan went—clearly struck a deep

[77] DMOR, DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 17 October 1936.

[78] *Blaydon Courier*, 4 February 1938.

[79] For more detail see Mates, *Spanish Civil War*, 61–90, 115–129.

chord amongst grassroots labour movement activists and the wider progressive working-class. This anxiety developed over time and a palpable worsening of the international situation in early 1938 prompted a crescendo of calls from almost all sections of the north-eastern movement (including the federations of Labour Parties and NEFTC) for an emergency national labour movement conference to consider the crisis. While there is little indication in many of the sources of the kinds of action the regional movement wanted on the issue, a combined NTFLP, NEFTC and Co-operative Party conference in June 1938 called for a national movement conference "to formulate industrial and political action to remove the Chamberlain government".[80] This willingness to contemplate the use of industrial direct action as a political weapon (a highly "unconstitutional" way of operating) made this considerable section of the usually "moderate" regional labour movement, for while at least, into radicals. At the same time, most of the radicals discussed above saw salvation coming not from within a united and militant labour movement, but rather in the form of a popular front alliance with liberals and other elements outside it. Indeed, most radical-organised activity on Spain had seemed geared to cooperating initially with Communists and later with liberals and others. Industrial direct action, surely the most "radical" method in these desperate times (and certainly considered by some radicals as a viable tactic to place pressure on the government on both the domestic and foreign fronts only fifteen months earlier), was, if mentioned at all, at best an afterthought in the radicals' rhetoric. On Spain, to some extent, the labour movement's "radicals" and "moderates" had switched places in north-east England.[81]

[80] *North Mail*, 20 June 1938.

[81] See Mates, *Spanish Civil War*, 135–143.